INTRODUCTION

Among the new things that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, none struck me more forcefully than the equality of conditions. I readily discovered what a prodigious influence this basic fact exerts on the workings of society. It imparts a certain direction to the public spirit and a certain shape to laws, establishes new maxims for governing, and fosters distinctive habits in the governed.

I quickly recognized that the influence of this same fact extends well beyond political mores and laws and that it holds no less sway over civil society than over government. It creates opinions, engenders feelings, suggests customs, and modifies everything that it does not produce.

As I pursued my study of American society, I therefore came increasingly to see the equality of conditions as the original fact from which each particular fact seemed to derive. It stood constantly before me as the focal point toward which all my observations converged.

Then I began to think again about our own hemisphere, and it seemed to me that I could make out there something quite similar to what I saw in the new world. I saw an equality of conditions which, although it had yet to reach the extreme of development it had attained in the United States, nevertheless resembled it more closely every day. And the same democracy that ruled the societies of America seemed to be advancing rapidly toward power in Europe.

In that moment I conceived the book that you are about to read.

A great democratic revolution is taking place among us. Everyone sees it, but not everyone judges it in the same way. There are those who regard it as something new and, believing it to be an accident, still hope to arrest it, while others deem it irresistible because in their view it is the oldest, most continuous, most permanent fact known to history.

Let us cast our minds back to France as she was seven hundred years ago. A small number of families owned the land and ruled its inhabitants. The right to command was part of a man's inheritance, handed down from generation to generation. Men

could act on one another only by means of force. All power stemmed from a single source: ownership of land.

At this point, however, the clergy established and quickly extended its political power. Its ranks were open to all, to the poor as well as the rich, the commoner as well as the lord. Equality began to insinuate itself into government through the Church, and a man who might have vegetated in eternal slavery as a serf could, as a priest, take his place among nobles and often sit above kings.

With the passage of time society became more civilized and more stable, and relations among men became more numerous and more complex. The need for civil laws was urgently felt. People began to specialize in the study of law. They emerged from the obscure precincts of the tribunals and the dusty recesses of judicial registries and went to sit at the prince's court alongside feudal barons clad in ermine and mail.

Kings ruined themselves in great enterprises. Nobles spent themselves in private wars. Commoners enriched themselves in commerce. Money began to exert an influence over affairs of state. Trade was a new source of wealth, which led to power, and financiers became a power in politics that was an object of scorn as well as flattery.

Little by little enlightenment spread. The taste for literature and the arts revived. Mind became an ingredient of success. Science was a means of government and intelligence a social force. Men of letters took up affairs of state.

As new avenues to power opened up, however, the value of birth declined. In the eleventh century nobility was an inestimable prize. In the thirteenth century it could be bought. The first ennoblement took place in 1270, and equality was at last introduced into government by way of aristocracy itself.

Over the past seven hundred years, the nobility at times chose to counter royal authority or deny power to its rivals by giving political power to the people.

Even more frequently the king invited the inferior classes of the state to participate in government in order to humble the aristocracy.

In France kings proved themselves to be the most energetic and constant of levelers. When they were ambitious and strong, they sought to raise the people to the level of the

nobles, and when they were moderate and weak, they allowed the people to take their place above the king. Some kings served democracy through their talents, others through their vices. Louis XI and Louis XIV tried hard to equalize everyone below the throne, and Louis XV descended with all his court into the dust.

Once citizens began to hold land by other than feudal tenure, and transferable wealth, being conspicuous, created new wellsprings of power and influence, no discovery in the arts, no improvement in commerce or industry, failed to create a comparable number of new elements of equality among men. From that moment on, every newly discovered process, every newly conceived need, every new desire that craved to be satisfied, marked further steps toward universal leveling. The taste for luxury, the love of war, the sway of fashion, indeed, all the passions of the human heart from the most superficial to the most profound, seemed to conspire to impoverish the rich and enrich the poor.

Once works of the intelligence became sources of power and wealth, people were obliged to look upon every scientific advance, every new discovery and idea, as a germ of power placed within the people's grasp. Poetry, eloquence, memory, the graces of the spirit, the fires of the imagination, profundity of thought — all these gifts, which heaven distributes at random, benefited democracy, and even if they happened to be in the possession of democracy's adversaries, they still served its cause by setting in relief the natural greatness of man. Democracy's conquests therefore spread with those of civilization and enlightenment, and literature was an arsenal open to all from which the weak and the poor daily drew arms.

If we run through the pages of our history, we find scarcely a single great event of the past seven hundred years that did not redound to equality's benefit.

The Crusades and the wars with England decimated the nobles and divided their estates. Municipal institutions introduced democratic liberty into the heart of the feudal monarchy. With the invention of firearms peasant and noble became equals on the field of battle. The printing press was a resource on which the intelligence of both could draw equally. The post brought enlightenment to the pauper's doorstep as well

as to the palace gate. Protestantism held that all men are equally equipped to find their way to heaven. America, on being discovered, opened a thousand new paths to fortune and brought wealth and power to obscure adventurers.

If, starting in the eleventh century, we examine the state of French society at fifty-year intervals, we see a twofold revolution taking place. The noble has moved steadily down the social ladder, and the commoner has moved steadily up. One is descending, the other rising. Every fifty years they move closer together; soon they will touch.

None of these changes is peculiar to France. Wherever we look in the Christian world, we see the same ongoing revolution.

Everywhere a diversity of historical incident has redounded to democracy's benefit. Everyone played a part: those who strove to ensure democracy's success as well as those who never dreamt of serving it; those who fought for it as well as those who declared themselves its enemies. Driven pell-mell down a single path, all worked toward a single goal, some in spite of themselves, others unwittingly — blind instruments in the hands of God.

The gradual development of the equality of conditions is therefore a providential fact. It has the essential characteristics of one: it is universal, durable, and daily proves itself to be beyond the reach of man's powers. Not a single event, not a single individual, fails to contribute to its development.

Is it wise to believe that a social movement that originated so far in the past can be halted by the efforts of a single generation? Does anyone think that democracy, having destroyed feudalism and vanquished kings, will be daunted by the bourgeois and the rich? Will it stop now that it has become so strong and its adversaries so weak?

Where are we headed, then? No one can say, because we have no basis for comparison. Already today conditions among Christians are more equal than they have ever been at any previous time anywhere in the world. Thus the magnitude of what has been done already prevents us from anticipating what can still be done.

This entire book was written in the grip of a kind of religious terror occasioned in the soul of the author by the sight

of this irresistible revolution, which for centuries now has surmounted every obstacle and continues to advance amid the ruins it has created.

We can discover indubitable signs of God's will even if God Himself remains silent. We have only to examine the habitual course of nature and the constant tendency of events. Though the Creator does not raise His voice, still I am certain that the curves along which the stars move through space are traced by His finger.

If, after a lengthy period of observation and sincere meditation, people were to become convinced that the gradual and progressive development of equality was at once their past and their future, the process would immediately take on a sacred character, as if it were an expression of the sovereign master's will. To wish to arrest democracy would then seem tantamount to a struggle against God himself, and nations would have no choice but to accommodate to the social state imposed on them by Providence.

The Christian peoples today present an alarming spectacle. The change that has them in its grip is already so powerful that it cannot be stopped yet not so rapid that there is no hope of altering its direction. Their fate is still in their hands, but not for much longer.

To educate democracy — if possible to revive its beliefs; to purify its mores; to regulate its impulses; to substitute, little by little, knowledge of affairs for inexperience and understanding of true interests for blind instinct; to adapt government to its time and place; to alter it to fit circumstances and individuals — this is the primary duty imposed on the leaders of society today.

A world that is totally new demands a new political science.

To this need, however, we have given little thought. Immersed in a rapidly flowing stream, we stubbornly fix our eyes on the few pieces of debris still visible on the shore, while the current carries us away and propels us backward into the abyss.

There is no European nation in which the great social revolution that I have just described has proceeded more rapidly than in France, but its progress here has always been haphazard.

Heads of state have never thought to prepare for this revolution in advance. It has come in spite of them, or without their knowledge. The nation's most powerful, intelligent, and morally responsible classes have never tried to take hold of the movement in order to guide it. Democracy has therefore been abandoned to its savage instincts. It has grown up like those children deprived of parental care who raise themselves in the streets of our cities and who know nothing of society but its vices and miseries. Almost before anyone was aware of its existence, it seized power unexpectedly. From then on each man has abjectly catered to the least of its desires. Once, it was worshiped as the very image of force. Later, after its strength had been sapped by its own excesses, legislators imprudently sought to destroy it rather than educate and discipline it. Instead of teaching it to govern, they thought only of expelling it from government.

Consequently, the democratic revolution has altered the material basis of society without bringing about the concomitant changes in laws, ideas, habits, and mores necessary to make it useful. Thus we have democracy minus that which ought to attenuate its vices and bring its natural advantages to the fore. We already see the evils it entails but know nothing as yet of the good it may bring.

When monarchy, supported by aristocracy, peaceably governed the nations of Europe, society for all its miseries nevertheless enjoyed several kinds of happiness that are difficult to appreciate or even imagine today.

The power of a few subjects raised insurmountable barriers against the tyranny of the prince; and kings, sensing the almost divine character that cloaked their authority in the eyes of the multitude, drew from the very respect they inspired the will not to abuse their power.

Nobles, despite the vast distance that separated them from the people, took a benevolent and tranquil interest in their fate, much as the shepherd concerns himself with the fate of his flock. Without regarding the poor as equals, they watched over the destiny of those whose welfare had been entrusted to them by Providence.

The people, never having imagined a social condition other than their own and never expecting to become the equals of

their leaders, accepted what benefits came their way and did not challenge their leaders' rights. They loved their superiors when they were clement and just and submitted to their rigors without hardship or ignominy as if bowing to inevitable woes imposed by the hand of God. Usage and custom set limits to tyranny, moreover, and established a kind of law in the very teeth of might.

Because the noble had no idea that anyone might wish to deprive him of privileges that he believed to be legitimate, and because the serf looked upon his inferiority as a consequence of nature's immutable order, it is easy to imagine how a sort of reciprocal good will might have been established between two classes so differently favored by fate. In this society one saw inequality and misery, but souls were not degraded.

Men do not become depraved through the exercise of power or the habit of obedience but rather by wielding a power that they consider to be illegitimate or by obeying a power that they regard as usurped and oppressive.

On one side were wealth, force, and leisure, accompanied by the indulgence of luxury, the refinement of taste, the pleasures of the mind, and the cultivation of the arts; on the other, labor, coarseness, and ignorance.

But within this ignorant and coarse multitude one also found energetic passions, generous sentiments, deep beliefs, and uncultivated virtues.

Thus organized, the body social could lay claim to stability, power, and above all glory.

But then distinctions of rank began to blur; the barriers that had separated man from man began to fall. Estates were divided, power was shared, enlightenment spread, intellectual capacities grew more equal. The social state became democratic, and in the end democracy peacefully established its dominion over institutions and mores.

Under such conditions, I can conceive of a society in which all people would think of themselves as the authors of the law, which they would consequently love and readily obey; and in which the authority of the government would be respected as necessary rather than divinely ordained, so that a person's love for the head of state would be not a passion but a reasoned and tranquil sentiment. Because each individual would

possess certain rights he could be sure of retaining, a manly confidence would develop between classes, a reciprocal condescension as devoid of pride as of servility.

The people, instructed as to their true interests, would recognize that in order to enjoy the benefits of society one has to accept its burdens. Citizens joined together in free association might then replace the individual power of nobles, and the state would be protected against tyranny and license.

To be sure, a democratic state constituted in this way would not stand still, but changes in the body of society would be orderly and progressive. Such a society would be less brilliant than an aristocracy but also less plagued by misery. Pleasures would be less extreme, prosperity more general. Knowledge would be less exalted but ignorance more rare. Feelings would be less passionate and habits milder. There would be more vices and fewer crimes.

In the absence of enthusiasm and ardent belief, citizens could nevertheless be summoned to make great sacrifices by appealing to their reason and experience. All men being equally weak, each would feel equally in need of his fellow man's support and, knowing that cooperation was the condition of that support, would readily see that his private interest was subsumed in the general interest.

The nation taken as a whole would be less brilliant, less glorious, and perhaps less powerful, but the majority of citizens would be better off. People would prefer peace to war, not out of despair of living better but out of appreciation of living well.

In such an order there might be some things that were neither good nor useful, but society would at least have appropriated as much of the good and useful as possible. In renouncing forever such social benefits as aristocracy might have been able to provide, society would have absorbed all the good that democracy had to offer.

But we — what have we done? In rejecting the social state of our ancestors and casting aside their institutions, ideas, and mores, what have we put in their place?

The prestige of royal power has evaporated, but the majesty of the law has failed to take its place. People nowadays despise authority yet still fear it, and fear extracts from them more than they previously gave out of respect and love.

It strikes me that we have destroyed those individuals who once had the wherewithal to battle tyranny on their own. Privileges once vested in families, corporations, and individuals are now bequeathed to the government alone. The sometimes oppressive but often protective power of a small number of citizens has given way to the weakness of all.

The breakup of fortunes has diminished the distance that once separated the poor from the rich. In coming together, however, they seem to have discovered new reasons to hate one another. Gripped by terror or envy, each rejects the other's claims to power. Neither has any idea of rights. Force is for both today's only means of persuasion and tomorrow's only guarantee.

The poor man for the most part clings to his forebears' prejudices without their faith and to their ignorance without their virtues. He accepts the doctrine of interest as the guide for his actions without understanding the science of that doctrine, and his selfishness is as unenlightened now as his selfless devotion was before.

Society is tranquil not because it is conscious of its strength and well-being but, on the contrary, because it believes itself to be weak and infirm. It fears that the slightest effort might do it in. Everyone senses that something is wrong, but no one has the courage or energy necessary to set it right. People feel desire, regret, sorrow, and joy, but nothing visible or lasting comes of it, much as the passion of an old man culminates in impotence and nothing more.

Thus we have abandoned what was good in our former state without acquiring what useful things our present state might have to offer. Having destroyed an aristocratic society, we seem ready to go on living complacently amid the rubble forever.

What is happening in the intellectual world is no less deplorable.

French democracy, hindered in its forward progress or left to cope unaided with its own unruly passions, toppled anything that stood in its way, shaking what it did not destroy. Rather than gradually taking control of society so as to rule in peace, it marches on through the chaos and tumult of battle. In the heat of struggle, people have been driven beyond the natural limits of their own opinions by the opinions and

excesses of their adversaries, to the point where they have lost sight of their objectives and begun to speak in ways that have little to do with their true feelings and secret instincts.

This is the source of the peculiar confusion we have been forced to witness.

I search my memory in vain and find nothing to excite greater sorrow and pity than what is taking place before our very eyes. The natural bonds that join opinion to taste and action to belief seem lately to have been broken. The harmony that has been observed throughout history between man's feelings and his ideas has apparently been destroyed, and the laws of moral analogy have seemingly been abolished.

Among us one still encounters zealous Christians who love to draw spiritual nourishment from the verities of the other life. They will no doubt thrill to the cause of human liberty, the source of all moral greatness. Christianity, which made all men equal in the sight of God, will not shrink from seeing all citizens as equal in the eyes of the law. But through a strange concatenation of events, religion has for the time being become enmeshed with the powers that democracy is bent on destroying. Often it spurns the equality it loves and curses freedom as an enemy instead of taking it by the hand and sanctifying its efforts.

Alongside these religious men I see others who look not to heaven but to earth. Champions of freedom, which they see as the source not only of the noblest virtues but above all of the greatest goods, they sincerely wish to establish its power and secure its benefits for mankind. In my view they should hasten to invoke the aid of religion, for they must know that without morality freedom cannot reign and without faith there is no basis for morality. Yet they have seen religion in the ranks of their adversaries, and for them that is enough: some attack it, and the rest dare not hasten to its defense.

In centuries past some base and venal souls spoke out in favor of slavery, while others of independent mind and generous heart fought a hopeless battle to preserve human freedom. Nowadays, however, it is common to meet men of noble and proud mien whose opinions directly contradict their tastes, men who vaunt a servile and base condition they have never known themselves. By contrast, others speak of

freedom as if they could feel what is sacred and grand in it, and vociferously demand for humanity rights they have always failed to recognize.

I see virtuous, peaceful men whose untainted morals, tranquil habits, comfortable circumstances, and enlightened thinking mark them out as natural leaders. Sincere and ardent patriots, they would make great sacrifices for their country. Yet civilization often finds them among its adversaries. They cannot distinguish its abuses from its benefits, and in their minds the idea of evil is inextricably linked to the idea of the new.

Alongside them I see other men who, in the name of progress, seek to reduce man to a material being. They look for what is useful without concern for what is just; they seek science removed from faith and prosperity apart from virtue. Having styled themselves champions of modern civilization, they have arrogantly placed themselves at its head, usurping a position abandoned by others which they are quite unworthy of occupying themselves.

Where, then, do things stand?

Religious men do battle against liberty, and friends of liberty attack religion. Noble and generous spirits extol slavery, while base and servile souls advocate independence. Honest and enlightened citizens oppose all progress, while men with neither patriotism nor morals style themselves apostles of civilization and enlightenment!

Has every other century been like this one? Has man always confronted, as he does today, a world in which nothing makes sense? In which virtue is without genius and genius without honor? In which the love of order is indistinguishable from the lust of tyrants? In which the sacred cult of liberty is confounded with contempt for the law? In which conscience casts but an ambiguous light on the actions of men? In which nothing any longer seems forbidden or allowed, honest or shameful, true or false?

Am I to believe that the Creator made man only to allow him to flounder endlessly in a sea of intellectual misery? I do not think so. For the societies of Europe God envisions a future calmer and more certain than the present. Though I cannot penetrate His designs, I will not for that reason cease

to believe in them. I would rather doubt my reason than His justice.

There is one country in the world in which the great social revolution of which I speak seems almost to have attained its natural limits. It has been effected there with simplicity and ease. Or, to put it another way, one might say that this country has witnessed the effects of the democratic revolution that we are now undergoing without having had the revolution itself.

The immigrants who settled in America at the beginning of the seventeenth century somehow separated the democratic principle from all the other principles with which it had to contend in the old societies of Europe and transplanted it alone to the shores of the new world. There it could mature under conditions of liberty and, because it advanced in harmony with mores, develop peacefully within the law.

There is no doubt in my mind that sooner or later we will come, as the Americans have come, to an almost complete equality of conditions. I do not conclude from this that we will one day be compelled to draw the same political consequences as the Americans from our similar social state. I am not at all convinced that they have hit upon the only form of government that a democracy may adopt. If, however, the same root cause has given rise to new laws and customs in both countries, then that is reason enough for us to take an immense interest in finding out what effects that cause has produced in each.

I did not study America, then, simply to satisfy my curiosity, though that would have been a legitimate thing to do. I was looking for lessons from which we might profit. Anyone who thinks that I set out to write a panegyric is sorely mistaken, as will be clear to anyone who reads this book. Nor was my goal to advocate any form of government in general, for I am among those who believe that absolute goodness is almost never to be found in laws. I do not even presume to judge whether the social revolution, whose progress seems to me irresistible, has been advantageous or harmful to mankind. I have taken the revolution to be a *fait accompli*, or nearly so, and looked for the nation in which it has unfolded in the fullest, most peaceful way so as to identify its natural conse-

quences and if possible discover ways of making it beneficial to man. I confess that in America I saw more than America. I sought there an image of democracy itself — its inclinations, character, prejudices, and passions. I wanted to become familiar with democracy, if only to find out what we had to hope from it, or to fear.

In the first part of this work, I have therefore attempted to show what shape democracy, left in America to its inclinations and all but abandoned to its natural instincts, imparted to the laws, what influence it had on the course of government, and in general what force it exerted on affairs of state. I wanted to know what benefits it produced, and what ills. I tried to find out what precautions the Americans took to keep it under control, and what others they omitted. And I undertook to point out what factors allowed democracy to govern society.

I had originally intended to write a second part in which I would have described the influence of equality of conditions and democratic government on civil society in America: on habits, ideas, and mores. But my ardor to fulfill this design has begun to wane. My work will have been rendered almost superfluous even before it is begun, for soon another author will set the principal traits of the American character before the reader. By concealing the gravity of his portrait beneath a light veil, he will adorn truth with greater charm than I am capable of.[1]

I do not know whether I have succeeded in communicating what I saw in America, but it was my sincere wish to do so: of that I am sure. So far as I know I never gave in to the temptation to tailor facts to ideas rather than adapt ideas to facts.

[1]At the time I published the first edition of this work, M. Gustave de Beaumont, my traveling companion in America, was still working on his book, entitled *Marie, or Slavery in the United States*, which has since appeared. M. de Beaumont's principal aim was to set in relief and call attention to the situation of Negroes in Anglo-American society. His work will shed a vivid new light on the question of slavery, a question vital for the united republics. Unless I am mistaken, M. de Beaumont's book will not only arouse the keen interest of those who look to it as a source of emotions and descriptions but should also win a more solid and durable success among readers who more than anything else desire true insights and deep truths.

Whenever it was possible to make a point with the aid of written documents, I was careful to consult either the original text or the most authentic and reputable sources.[2] I have indicated those sources in footnotes, so that anyone may verify them. When it came to opinions, political practices, or remarks on manners, I sought out the best-informed people. On important and controversial matters, I did not rely on one informant alone but based my opinion on all the testimony taken together.

For this the reader will have to take my word. In many instances I might have supported my opinion by citing the names of authorities either familiar to everyone or worthy of being so. A stranger sitting at fireside with his host will often hear important truths that might be withheld from a friend. With the stranger it is a relief to break an enforced silence, and the stranger's indiscretion need not be feared because his stay will be short. When information was confided to me, I wrote it down immediately, but these notes will never leave my files. I would rather hinder my work's chance of success than add my name to the list of travelers who repay the generous hospitality of their hosts with embarrassment and chagrin.

I am well aware that, despite the care I have taken in writing this book, nothing would be easier than to criticize it, should anyone wish to do so.

Anyone who cares to examine the book closely will find, I think, one dominant thought running through its various parts. But I have been obliged to look at a wide range of subjects, and anyone who wishes to set a single, isolated fact against the body of facts collected here, or a particular idea against the whole body of ideas, will find it easy to do so. I therefore ask only that the reader do me the favor of reading

[2]Legislative and administrative documents were made available to me with a kindness whose memory will always elicit my gratitude. Among the American officials who assisted my research, I will mention especially Mr. Edward Livingston, the Secretary of State (now minister plenipotentiary in Paris). During my visit to Congress, Mr. Livingston was kind enough to provide me with most of the documents I possess dealing with the federal government. Mr. Livingston is one of those rare men whom one likes from having read their writings, whom one admires and honors before meeting them, and to whom one is happy to owe a debt of gratitude.

my work in the same spirit in which I wrote it, and of judging the book on the basis of the general impression that it leaves, just as I made up my mind on the basis not of a single fact but of the preponderance of facts.

Bear in mind, too, that the author who wishes to make himself intelligible is obliged to explore all the theoretical consequences of his ideas, often pushing them to the limit of the false and impractical. In action it is sometimes necessary to brush the rules of logic aside, but in reasoned argument this is never the case. It is almost as difficult to be inconsistent in language as it is to be consistent in action.

To conclude, I will point out myself what many readers are likely to regard as the major defect of my book. It is not precisely tailored to anyone's point of view. In writing it, I had no intention of serving or opposing any party. I did not try to look at things differently from the parties, but I did try to see further. They busy themselves with tomorrow only, while I aimed to think about the future.